

CHAPTER 4

A Remote Island Within a Danish Kingdom

The baroque is not a stylistic phenomenon or agenda that appears periodically in literature; the baroque text emerged at a particular time and was closely connected to a particular type of society. The chronological boundaries of the period can be debated but we may certainly situate it between the Reformation and the onset of romanticism, and it certainly includes the seventeenth century. During the baroque period society was notable for the power of the monarchy and the cultural dominance of the church, and the baroque text may be regarded as the intellectual offspring of these two centers of authority. It flourished particularly in learned society; it was innovative and yet its features derive from ancient tradition. This chapter aims to present an overview of seventeenth-century Icelandic society, examining its cultural assumptions and literary practices.

In his study of the baroque in Scandinavian literature Wilhelm Friese identifies two cultural environments in which seventeenth-century baroque literature thrived: courtly and non-courtly. There was, first of all, the society in and around the courts of Vienna and Versailles, and also of Copenhagen and Stockholm, where the court was the political and cultural heart of each state. Christian IV ruled Denmark until 1648 and will long be remembered for the splendid buildings he commissioned. He sought out the finest architects, artists, and musicians from England, Holland, and Germany and found projects for all of them in Denmark. In the king's service we find bourgeois officials, scholars, and artists, all of whose work

sought to celebrate royal power and glory and to reflect a world governed by order and harmony. Creative arts such as the theatre and ballet flourished, while Petrarchan love lyrics were composed alongside great epic poems. At the court there was ample opportunity for feasting and occasional verse. For example, to accompany a lavish feast held in Copenhagen in 1634 to celebrate the marriage of Crown Prince Christian (who never became king and died in 1646) to Magdalena Sibilla, Princess of Saxony, there was a major court ballet performance, and plays by Johann Lauremberg (Hans Willumsen Lauremberg, 1590–1658) were staged. Lauremberg had been a professor in his hometown of Rostock before moving to Sorø (in Denmark). In his comedies we find farmers depicted in interludes and their reactions to and misunderstandings of court life—and their use of language—are comically portrayed. Yet the court was charmed by pastoral poetic depictions of the simple rural life, even though it was far removed from the sometimes grim agrarian realities. Celadon and Daphne, the young lovers in Honoré D’Urfé’s pastoral novel *L’Astrée*, a work that had been translated into Danish via German, became popular figures in plays and poems. Anders Bording’s 1645–1647 pastoral poems were a mixture of translation and original composition, whereas Thomas Kingo’s pastoral pieces were entirely his own work. Most of these pastoral works were created for specific courtly occasions.

Christian IV’s long reign (1588–1648) was in many respects a golden age; it saw the rise of the bourgeoisie, commerce, industry, and the arts. However, there was a darker side. The king’s foreign policy created much hostility and his campaigns against the Swedes had dire consequences for Denmark and its people. At the time of his death, the country was almost in ruins, with widespread poverty and misery and a total lack of political leadership. Frederik III succeeded Christian IV and in these terrible circumstances succeeded in strengthening royal authority and, with the support of the citizenry and the church, greatly reducing the power of the nobility. German influence had been widespread during the 1559–1588 reign of Frederik II and his consort, Sophie Amalie, daughter of the Duke of Braunschweig-Lüneburg in north Germany. This influence could be seen, for example, in the invitations extended to German poets to spend time at the Danish court, and they expressed their gratitude in

a variety of occasional poems dedicated to the royal family (Friese 1968, 84 and *passim*). These writers were certainly influential in promoting German poetry and thought in the host nation (Friese 1968, 66). In several respects Frederik III was unlike his father Christian IV, not least in his more sophisticated cultural tastes. During his reign ballet began to flourish in earnest in Copenhagen and the first operas were performed; and on stage young princes and princesses could be found alongside professional artistes. Frederik III enjoyed French-style ballets based on myths, pastoral plays, hunting and collecting books and works of art (particularly unconventional ones). Icelanders helped him collect vellum manuscripts from Iceland (Jón Helgason 1958, 84–85). As for his interest in natural science, he was a great admirer of the astronomer Tyge [Tycho] Brahe (1546–1601), and planned to publish a complete edition of his works (*Dansk biografisk leksikon* 7:243). For eleven years from 1666 *Den danske Mercurius*, a prose newspaper edited by Anders Bording (1619–1677), was published at the Danish court in Copenhagen. Its principal function was to celebrate Frederik III's achievements and to legitimize potentially unpopular measures such as tax impositions and military campaigns. The role of the court poet was much the same as that of other courtiers and servants, as Bording notes with some force in his newspaper: "Be true and faithful to the king; that is my advice for avoiding trouble."¹ Kingo too lost no poetic opportunity to sing the praises of the royal family. He composed a poem about the campaigns of Christian V (who reigned 1670–1699), celebrating whenever the king succeeded in annexing new or lost territory into the Danish kingdom. For the baroque poet the king is the sun, the midpoint, the life-giver, the symbol of the divine plan around which everything else is centered, and according to which everyone and everything has its individual station and role in life; it was a plan that no one was authorized to question or challenge.

Some scholars argue that while this may have been the nature of the baroque world, everything beyond its confines was of a different order. However, Friese claims that while much seventeenth-century

1. Vær Kongen huld och tro: Det er mit raad for fald (Bording 1984, 75; see Friese 1968, 215).

Scandinavian literature can be called court poetry, the non-courtly world cannot be ignored if the baroque period as a whole is to be understood. He argues that the literature created far from the Danish court, in more northerly countries such as Norway and Iceland, is just as much a part of baroque culture, having played an important though different role in society. That difference lies particularly in the fact that the listeners and others who engaged with this culture were from the agrarian and bourgeois classes. The king's influence certainly extended to distant regions, though it could never be as immediate or intense as in the royal court itself. As an example of bourgeois literature Friese cites the panegyric poems celebrating Gothenburg (by Johan Runius) and Bergen (by Petter Dass). In such verse, created far from the court, different viewpoints emerge, as for example in the depiction of women and marriage. The ideal woman is presented as a hard-working individual who remains at home discharging her household responsibilities, quite unlike the carefree and frivolous young ladies depicted in courtly love-poems. Runius composes for a bourgeois readership, whereas Petter Dass writes about and for rural society, both in *Den norske Dale-Viise* [The Norwegian valley verse] and later in his most celebrated work, *Nordlands Trompet eller Beskrivelse over Nordlands Amt* [Nordland's trumpet, or Description of the Nordland region]. The poem is dedicated not to the king of Norway and Denmark but rather to the people of his home community. In a poem dedicated to Dorothe Engelbretsdatter, Dass states that he lives "mod Verdens Ende" [at the ends of the earth] (Dass 1980, 1:268). Viewed from the Copenhagen royal court Norway and Iceland must indeed have seemed at the margins of civilization, but despite their isolation these regions were in touch with the latest literary and artistic movements (Friese 1968, 226).

Many scholars who have discussed the baroque consider that its literary characteristics were inextricably linked with scholars, civil servants, and the nobility, and that it flourished especially in the courts of mainland Europe. The farther we are from these centers, it is suggested, the more provincial and less baroque the culture becomes. In the present chapter's overview of Icelandic society during the "age of learning" it is therefore appropriate to ask: did

conditions exist in Iceland that were conducive to the emergence of what can be called baroque literature? Were some genres—their origin, distribution, and use—associated with particular classes and groups? Was there in Iceland a social class that might have felt the need for baroque literature in some form? How did the baroque manifest itself in sacred and secular texts, and how was it connected with the ruling elite and the common people?

The seventeenth-century Danish-Norwegian kingdom was the largest in Scandinavia, extending from Greenland in the west to the island of Bornholm in the east, from the northernmost tip of Norway south to the River Elbe. It was a kingdom that embraced Scania, Halland, and Blekinge (now parts of Sweden); Slesvig and parts of Holstein; the island of Gotland; Norway; and Iceland. The Danish-Norwegian kingdom was frequently at war with Sweden, the other major power in the region. They fought over territory and they also competed culturally, each seeking to claim that its history and language were older and more remarkable than those of its rival. The Danes also aimed to be the principal naval power in the Baltic region. Iceland was a dependent territory of the Danish king, and in fact just one province among many others (Gustafsson 1985, 42). In Denmark the bourgeoisie grew slowly but steadily in influence after the Reformation. In their power struggle with royal authority members of the nobility steadily lost their influence and this led to the emergence of absolute monarchy in Denmark around 1660. Royal power in Iceland grew steadily, reaching its peak with the ceremony of homage to the monarch that took place in Kópavogur in 1662. There were similar developments elsewhere in Europe, marked by the centralization of royal authority. The growth of such power can be traced to the Reformation in 1550, whose influence was by no means confined to ecclesiastical life and culture.

In Iceland one economic effect of the new dispensation was that the king acquired a fifth of the land. Royal income from Iceland also increased in other ways. Iceland was an agrarian society in which sheep farming was the most important element, together with seasonal fishing. Everyone, even civil servants, was in some sense

a farmer. In turn, many farmers were tenants, with roughly half the land owned by the king and the church, and the other half by a limited number of Icelanders. Up to 1684 Iceland was a feudal state, and the feudal overlord was known as the “höfuðsmaður” or “hirðstjóri” [governor]. He would always be well-born and have his eye on a career in the Danish navy. As governor he would seldom visit Iceland, but his deputy, the “fógeti” [bailiff], lived at Bessastaðir. The governor himself was chosen by the king, who was normally answerable to the Danish “ríkisráð” [state council] but had a fairly free hand in running the navy; as for the governance of Norway the king believed that this was his responsibility alone and had nothing to do with his state council. It is likely that he took a similar view as regards ruling Iceland. Certainly from 1633 the king chose two Norwegian noblemen in succession for the position of governor, Pros Mundt (1633–1644) and Henrik Bjelke (1648–1683), thereby passing over Danish noblemen and his chief advisors, the state council (Helgi Þorláksson 2003, 225). With an absentee governor responsibility for ruling Iceland fell mainly on the bailiff, who had a wide range of powers, including judicial authority, and also had the opportunity to profit greatly from his activities. Bailiffs were generally from modest bourgeois backgrounds. Icelandic leaders believed that they had more in common with the nobility, and there was tension between these two groups. This is apparent, for example, in the position of Bishop Brynjólfur, who had great respect for the king and Bjelke but did his best to avoid all contact with the bailiffs (Helgi Þorláksson 2003, 243). In the 1680s, in line with the constitution of the Danish-Norwegian kingdom, the offices of “stiftamtmaður” [governor], “amtmaður” [regional governor], and “landfógeti” [treasurer] were established. The Alþingi was in decline and by 1700 had been reduced to just a law court.

The links between Icelanders and other countries and peoples were based on overseas trade. Necessities such as corn, timber, iron, fishing tackle, textiles (other than wool), liquor, and other goods had to be imported. In return Icelanders sold fish, woolen goods, lamb, fish oil, and eiderdown to the merchants; also whales’ teeth and falcons. For a long time Icelanders traded successfully with England, Holland, and Germany. The links with England in the

fifteenth century were sufficiently strong for this period often to be referred to by modern Icelandic historians as “enska öldin” [the English era]. After the institution of a trade monopoly in 1602 the Danish monarch gave special permission for citizens in Copenhagen, Elsinore, and Malmö to trade with Iceland, while Icelanders were allowed to trade only with merchants from those cities. These Scandinavian traders set sail for Iceland in the spring, arriving at the trading ports in mid-summer (June and July); commerce continued until September or October. The king’s main priority in instituting monopoly trading was to override the commercial power of the Hanseatic merchants in Hamburg. German links remained strong, however; they had traded with Hafnarfjörður for many years and had even built a church there. Their Iceland voyages continued throughout the seventeenth century, partly because Danish merchants were unable to trade independently. It was not until 1622/23, when the Danish king made the port of Glückstadt (established 1617, still part of Denmark, and close to Hamburg) into the primary hub for the Iceland trade, that the voyages from Hamburg began to decline (Seelow 1989, 5).

Icelandic criticism of the Danish trade monopoly became more muted during the middle of the century. Icelanders may well have realized that the arrangement had certain advantages, not least in facilitating trading contacts with ports where animals could be slaughtered: there had been no dealings with these centers during the days of free trade (Helgi Þorláksson 1997, 19). Another significant factor was that Icelanders continued with their illegal but profitable trade with England and Holland in the period 1630–1690. The “lögmaður” [lawman] Árni Oddsson defended the practice as a necessary breach of the law and Bishop Brynjólfur Sveinsson gave it his blessing (Helgi Þorláksson 1997, 19). Many people at the time regarded the trade monopoly as a major disaster for Iceland. It was, for example, strongly criticized by Björn Jónsson of Skarðsá (1574–1655) in his Prologue to the 1639 *Skarðsárannáll* [Skarðsá chronicle] (*Annálar 1400–1800*, 1:48). However, Björn also believed that Iceland’s desperate condition had more than one cause. Apart from the trade monopoly and poor harvests he attributed the national decline over the first forty years of the century to a lack of

organization and efficiency in the country. Icelanders clearly lacked the capacity to unite against Danish power. It proved impossible for them to stand together as a people: “the interests of individuals, classes, families, and regions have always been stronger than the interests of the whole.”²

Census records confirm that there were around 50,000 Icelanders in 1703. The years around 1690 saw a serious decline in population due to starvation and disease, yet before then numbers seem to have been higher than at any time in Icelandic history until the nineteenth century (Helgi Þorláksson 1997, 24). The Icelandic civil servant class was small (three to four percent of the population according to Gustafsson 1985, 27) but quite powerful. Class divisions were self-evident. Members of particular families occupied the principal offices of state, with positions handed down from person to person. Family background dictated questions of class and position. In the mid-eighteenth century Sveinn Sölvason notes that people in Iceland are either “officials or commoners; and those with some status are either of the religious or secular classes,”³ while Bishop Brynjólfur Sveinsson sees a contrast between those in authority and ordinary people (Helgi Þorláksson 2003, 236). Though there was no aristocracy in Iceland some people regarded themselves as equivalent to foreign nobility and behaved accordingly. Class distinctions are apparent in a variety of contemporary sources from this period. There are accounts of weddings where strict rules of precedence are followed, based on social status: when naming guests at the wedding feast, those in positions of secular authority come first, followed by the upper ranks of the clergy, with the more lowly clerics bringing up the rear (Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir 1996, 226). In the older *Vatnsfjarðarannáll* [Vatnsfjörður chronicle], for example, there is an account of a feast held at Þingvellir in 1649, at which oaths of allegiance were sworn to King Frederik III. The order of priority for the swearing ceremony was as follows: bishops, lawyers, provosts, district officials, and overseers of pre-Reformation monastic land. Men of more modest distinction sat in less privileged areas.

2. eigin hagsmunir eða hagsmunir stétta, ætta og héraða hafa jafnan orðið yfirsterkari hagsmunum heildarinnar (Helgi Þorláksson 1997, 26).

3. stands personur, og alþýdu, edur almuga menn. Stands personur eru annad hvort andlegar eða veraldlegar stiettar (quoted from Gustafsson 1985, 26n).

There were two bishops in Iceland: at Hólar (Guðbrandur Þorláksson until 1627; Þorlákur Skúlason until 1656; Gísli Þorláksson until 1684), and at Skálholt (Oddur Einarsson until 1630; Brynjólfur Sveinsson until 1674; Þórður Þorláksson until 1697). Until the establishment of absolute monarchy in Denmark in 1662 Icelanders had traditionally chosen their own bishops: Þórður Þorláksson was the first to be appointed by the king. There were four provosts at Hólar and thirteen in the Skálholt diocese. There were two lawmen, one responsible for the north and west, the other covering the south and east. The upper echelons of Icelandic society chose the lawmen from among their own ranks, and the two officials may therefore be regarded as representatives of that class. Legislative power was in the hands of the king and the Alþingi, and district officials had to be Icelandic. This was a matter of great importance to Icelanders whose authority over land and local administration was the source of their power and income: for the ruling class in Iceland there could be few things more disturbing than the prospect of surrendering land and authority in Iceland to foreigners (Helgi Þorláksson 1984, 41). There were some twenty *sýslumenn* [district sheriffs] who dealt with all secular administration. After 1620 ship captains had to swear oaths to the relevant local sheriff to the effect that they would be loyal to the king and obedient to the Bessastaðir authorities. Some regarded this as humiliating, especially having to swear an oath to the sheriff (Helgi Þorláksson 1984, 33; compare 2003, 243). Sheriffs in turn were obliged to attend the Alþingi once a year and among their other duties was making appointments to the Law Council. They alone passed sentences in their districts; the Law Council, a higher authority, met annually; the highest authority in the land was the Superior Court; and above that was the Supreme Court in Copenhagen.

There were two Latin schools in Iceland, at Hólar and Skálholt, each with 24 students who would receive tuition, free board and lodging, writing materials, light, and clothing. School activities revolved around two factors: fish and teachers. If there was no fish to feed the pupils teaching was suspended (Helgi Þorláksson 2003, 380). Though a high priority was placed on appointing well-educated teachers, their pay was modest and many were eager to secure more lucrative positions. At the conclusion of their studies

in Denmark students could expect to be appointed to a curacy back home, or they might choose to continue their education in Copenhagen. Though there were other European universities that might have come into consideration, Icelandic students in the University of Copenhagen could count on free accommodation, while after 1633 Icelandic graduates from Copenhagen also enjoyed priority when it came to appointments back home. This inevitably meant that very few students chose to study elsewhere in Europe (Seelow 1989, 10). Helgi Þorláksson has shown that seventeenth-century Denmark was a major force in scholarship with a flourishing interest in Old Norse culture; it is not clear that many European cities would have offered a much better education than Copenhagen (Helgi Þorláksson 1997, 22). There are instances of Icelandic students in the Danish capital seizing the opportunity to travel more widely in Europe for educational reasons, but these were the exception rather than the rule. Poverty prevented many Icelandic students from even going to Copenhagen and fewer still had the resources for further travel outside Denmark. A theological qualification from the university could lead to advancement within the church, whilst a law degree was good preparation for a career as a secular official. In a society in which men were not born into the nobility, it was education, office, and land ownership that served as the fee for joining the ruling elite. This meant, for instance, that officials in Iceland were often better educated than equivalent figures in Denmark and Norway (Gustafsson 1985, 101). University education in Copenhagen provided a few young Icelanders with the opportunity to acquaint themselves with new life-styles and cultural movements. During the seventeenth century half the Icelanders who studied in Copenhagen were the sons of pastors, and a further third were from the families of secular officials. For them the University of Copenhagen was a window looking out over a big wide world, their link with contemporary learning, and their best opportunity to learn about foreign culture (Jakob Benediksson 1987, 206–207). Some Icelandic students had dealings with celebrated scholars such as Ole Worm. He proved to be a loyal friend to Icelanders, a private tutor to nineteen students during his professorial years, and a conscientious correspondent with many of them after their return home. Magnús Ólafsson and Stefán Ólafsson were among this group, as will be discussed below.

It was for a long time the accepted view among Icelandic historians that the seventeenth century was “monotonous and mostly wretched, the most lamentable era in Icelandic history [. . .] that we know of.”⁴ For many it was “an age of monopoly, oppression, harsh treatment, famine, degeneration, witchcraft, fanaticism, and spiritual gloom.”⁵ In recent decades scholars have revised this view somewhat. They suggest that the seventeenth century is rather more complex than previously acknowledged, and that the extent of hardships during this period may have been exaggerated. There were certainly difficult years at the beginning and end of the century when people died in their thousands, but in the period from 1640–1670 harvests were mostly good, new settlements developed, and the population grew (Helgi Þorláksson 1997, 24). Brynjólfur Sveinsson served as bishop at this time and people were not slow to associate this much-respected figure with those better years (see Jón Halldórsson 1903, 285).

Helgi Þorláksson characterizes the seventeenth century as an era of great contrasts, contrasts, and contradictions in attitudes and activities:

Moral demands were stern yet at the same time immorality was rife. Serious faith was strong and yet social gatherings featured a mixture of pornography and Scripture, and there was unruliness during church services. Punishments were very severe and yet high crimes and misdemeanors were rife. Bribery was condemned and yet practiced enthusiastically.⁶

Helgi suggests that some of these contrasts may reflect the clash between traditional Catholic and new Lutheran ideas, and also the tension between humanist compassion and the fanaticism of those in the grip of witchcraft. Last but not least he finds it tempting to

4. *dapurlegasta öld Íslandssögunnar* [. . .] *fábreytt og flest ömurlegt, sem til frásagnar var* (Jón Helgason 1966, 5; see Helgi Þorláksson 1997, 16).

5. *öld einokunar, kúgunar, harðýðgi, hallæra, hnignunar, galdrafárs, ofstækis og andlegs myrkurs* (Helgi Þorláksson 1984, 4; compare 2004, 5 and *passim*).

6. *Siðferðiskrófur voru strangar en siðferði um leið misbrestasamt. Trúaralvara var mikil en samt viðgengust vökunætur með klámi og guðsorði í bland og getið er óláta í kirkjum. Refsingar voru furðulega harðar en glæpir og afbrot að sama skapi tíð. Mútur voru fordæmdar en stundaðar af kappi.* (Helgi Þorláksson 2003, 407)

view seventeenth-century history as a conflict between traditional Icelandic conservatism and the new European ways of thinking that accompanied the consolidation of royal absolutism. Foreign citizens, merchants, and sheriffs face off against native Icelandic leaders, who would do everything in their power to retain their privileges and authority, endorse the self-determination of major landholders, and resist those who were more open to new thoughts and theories that could have helped improve conditions for the common people.

At this time Icelanders became increasingly interested in their own history and cultural inheritance, not least their old manuscripts. This interest may be traced to the influence of Danish scholars who, touched by the spirit of humanism, had come to understand the value of Icelandic vellums as sources, and the need to have these texts transcribed and published, complete with translations and commentaries. The writings of Arngrímur Jónsson the Learned, especially his *Crymogæa*,⁷ had helped to initiate a movement that led directly to the growth of such interests. One indication of this was the significant increase in the number of copies of early vellums made during the 1630s and 1640s. In many ways this interest was comparable with and had the same roots as scholarly interest elsewhere in Europe in classical texts and sources. There was only one printing house in Iceland, established at Hólar on the initiative of Jón Arason, and Guðbrandur Þorláksson and others made use of it until its transfer to Skálholt in 1685. In fact Bishop Brynjólfur wanted to establish a press to publish old texts but Bishop Þorlákur Skúlason of Hólar resisted this initiative. Þorlákur and Brynjólfur were different figures in many respects; Brynjólfur was more of a church leader and antiquarian, and the two men may also have differed theologically. There were also personal tensions: Þorlákur was not well disposed towards Árni Oddsson the lawman, who was a good friend of Brynjólfur's. On the other hand Þorlákur was a friend of Guðmundur Hákonarson, with whom Brynjólfur had been in dispute (Helgi Þorláksson 2003, 336–337 and 250). That said, the church supervised all printing in Iceland and with very few exceptions allowed only religious works to be published. On

7. A Greek term for "Iceland".

the other hand work on medieval manuscripts was undertaken enthusiastically in both episcopal seats, with the systematic copying of laws, annals, genealogies, old poetry, sagas, and much else. With the accession of Frederik III in 1648 official engagement with Icelandic manuscripts in Denmark began in earnest. The king wrote to Brynjólfur in 1656 requesting that important vellums be sent to Copenhagen. The bishop duly read out this request at the Alþingi, and he himself responded by sending *Flateyjarbók*, followed six years later by the *Konungsbók* text of the *Poetic Edda*. In an accompanying letter he expressed the wish that the manuscript should not be locked away in a library but rather translated, published, and read.

It was on the initiative of the two bishops, Brynjólfur Sveinsson and Þorlákur Skúlason, that many pastors and literate members of the laity copied and sometimes also provided explanatory commentaries for old works. Björn Jónsson of Skarðsá is a case in point. He lived for weeks on end at Hólar, transcribing manuscripts and then being well rewarded by the bishop, sometimes in the form of a cow in the spring. Similar systematic work on manuscripts and literary texts was undertaken in the Westfjords. As previously noted, it is just this interest in Old Icelandic studies to which Sigurður Nordal sought to draw attention when he proposed that the term “age of learning” should be used to identify this period in Iceland’s history. However, as Hubert Seelow has pointed out, this term might serve to exclude other important works, such as the many religious texts written, translated, and published at this time, not to mention the secular literature that found its way to Iceland or was composed there (Seelow 1989, 14–15). In addition to the Bible, works printed included collections of sermons, handbooks for pastors, Lutheran texts, and many other hymns and related pieces designed for edification and meditation. Bishop Guðbrandur at Hólar initiated these activities and they flourished under his supervision. At the same time he and other leaders of the Reformation fought strongly against those secular works that he regarded as harmful to his parishioners:

worthless verses, ballads about ancestors and trolls, love songs and ditties, indecent rhymes, gloomy and ironic verses, and other tasteless

and seedy squibs, pornography, libels, and scurrilous works that are especially relished and cultivated by the common people [. . .].⁸

The bishop was well aware that many of his flock enjoyed such works, and clearly saw it as his duty to change their tastes and control the literature available to them. While his efforts to challenge the widespread popularity of *rímur* were unsuccessful, he was able to influence the choice of subject matter by finding poets to create *rímur* based on biblical texts. Thus the *Vísnaþók* [Book of verses] of 1612 includes biblical *rímur* by two pastors, Einar Sigurðsson of Eydalir and Jón Bjarnason of Presthólar. Other poets followed their example, notably the renowned séra Guðbrandur Erlendsson of Fell (1595–1670) (Óskar Halldórsson 1996, 10). Finally, the seventeenth century was a rich period of hymn writing in Iceland. Though Bishop Guðbrandur died in 1627, the many hymns created subsequently was the fruits of seeds he had sown.

In seventeenth-century Iceland a wide variety of other literary genres flourished as well as hymns, despite the official policy of printing only religious works. Some genres, popular among particular classes or groups, may also have enjoyed wider circulation. Though chapbooks with their entertaining tales might be considered popular literature, we should recall that Magnús Jónsson of Vigur (1637–1702) was among those who introduced such narratives to Iceland. Not only was he from a distinguished family (the eldest son of Jón Arason, provost in Vatnsfjörður) but he was also a direct descendant of Bishop Guðbrandur Þorláksson. Another keen translator of chapbook material was Jón Þorláksson (ca. 1643–1712), son of Bishop Þorlákur Skúlason of Hólar. Thus learned men closely associated with the church played an important role in creating or disseminating literature for the common people (Seelow 1989, 260ff.). There was a remarkable growth in secular prose literature. Legendary, chivalric, and “family” sagas enjoyed a robust post-medieval life in manuscript, together with the new sagas and popular tales that were created: “secular literature was thus quite widely

8. þeir onytsamlegu kuedlingar / trólla og fornmannar ríjmur / mannsaungar / afmors vjjsur / bruna kuæde / hædz og hugmodz vjjsur / og annar vondur og liotur kuedskapur / klæm / nijd / og keskne / sem hier hia alþydu folke framarmeir er elskad og ikkad [. . .] (*Sálmabók* 1589, 11).

disseminated despite not being printed”.⁹ Chapbook narratives were recycled in *rímur*, and many tales were translated into Icelandic, some of them more than once (Seelow 1989, 279). *Rímur* continued to be widely composed, and popular prose tales were recast in verse. Other favorite verse narratives included fairy tales and ballads, though their poetic form differed from that of *rímur*. Many kinds of meters could be found and their number increased considerably during the seventeenth century. Though attracting widespread disapproval, these secular works were often composed by poets from clerical families; the texts were far from being the exclusive preserve of the non-educated classes. The most prolific seventeenth-century *rímur* poet was séra Eiríkur Hallsson of Höfði (1614–1698), who composed both secular and biblical works. Like all *rímur* poets he made use of Eddic diction and imagery; there was much rivalry among poets as to who could demonstrate particular ingenuity in the use of kennings. *Rímur* composition was an Icelandic national art-form, appealing to educated people familiar with Eddic or other early poetry: thus, Björn Jónsson of Skarðsá, Hallgrímur Pétursson, Eiríkur Hallsson, and Jón Eggertsson (1643–1689) were all *rímur* poets as well as being well schooled in more traditional verse (Óskar Halldórsson, 1996, 12). It may be significant, however, that while Hallgrímur Pétursson composed *rímur*, Magnús Ólafsson and Stefán Ólafsson did not. Both Magnús and Stefán came from distinguished families, whereas at various times during his life Hallgrímur had links with both sides of the social divide. In *vikivaki* poems we can detect the characteristic tensions of the period between sacred and secular; they reveal the church’s determination to make use of whatever literary materials appealed to ordinary folk. The works were originally dance songs and many are love poems, but their form was adopted during the century in both sacred and secular poetry. This innovative use of ballad measure for spiritual poetry can be traced to the 1612 *Vísnaþók*, which includes “Kvæði af stallinum Kristí” [A poem about Christ’s manger], a celebrated piece by séra Einar Sigurðsson of Eydalir, composed in *vikivaki* style (Jón Torfason, Kristján Eiríksson, and Einar Sigurbjörnsson 2000, xli).

9. Den verdslige litteratur fik således betydelig udbredelse til trods for at den ikke blev trykt (Jón Samsonarson 1972, 177).

Learned poems of all kinds were popular, such as *Einvaldsóður* [Poem on monarchy] by séra Guðmundur Erlendsson of Fell, a digest of the history of mankind from Noah's flood to the Reformation in six books, written in *fornyrðislag* meter.¹⁰ The assumption in such works seems to have been that poetry should be instructive and thereby serve a useful social function. Many pieces offering advice or moral instruction were also created, the latter directed at particular groups or classes, such as young women or common folk. In *Hústafla* [House chart], by séra Jón Magnússon of Laufás (1601–1675), moral instruction is categorized and directed to particular social groups. It was important that everyone should understand which social class and position he or she belongs to and behave accordingly. A number of poems about contemporary events were composed, either to present a true picture of those events, or a version favoring one of the interested parties, or a version designed to rebut any such biased treatment.

Satirical verse and poems about transience are two prominent seventeenth-century literary genres that reflect the dominant religious views of the time. Class distinctions are clearly identifiable in satirical verse because even though timeless moral values lie at the heart of these poems, they were often directed against the behavior of particular groups. Such pieces take various forms but all inveigh against injustice or unreasonable conduct. When the ruling elite is targeted, we find criticism of overbearing behavior, unjust courts, bribery, and corruption, while the common people are accused of vanity, arrogance, and aggression. The poems confirm that each social class has a role to play and ought to behave accordingly. It does not occur to poets at this stage that changes to that fixed social structure might be desirable; instead, it was everyone's duty to discharge his responsibilities within the established order. Poems about transience and death are linked to this type of verse. The poets offer philosophical reflections on decline, decay, death and destruction; references to class distinctions are noticeable by their absence. The main, chilling message is often that in the face of such

10. See Robert G. Cook, "A Critical Edition of *Einvaldsóður* (Poem on Monarchy) by séra Guðmundur Erlendsson (ca. 1595–1670)," (PhD diss., The Johns Hopkins University, 1962).

elemental forces all people are as one; death does not inquire about the class, position, office or age of its victims.

Occasional pieces, various eulogies, and commemorative poems all belong to a literary genre that emerges in Iceland after the Reformation and was certainly a foreign importation. These poems, composed in either Latin or Icelandic, are closely associated with the social elite, the educated officials. To be able to understand (and compose) Latin poems required the kind of education enjoyed by only a select group, and thus occasional poems were composed almost exclusively by and for society's upper echelons. This did not mean, however, that such poetry was withheld from the common people; on the contrary, the lives of the nobility should set an example for others to follow, and thus accounts of those lives could be instructive. Accordingly, Ólafur Jónsson's eulogy for Helga Aradóttir of Ögur (her father was Ari Magnússon, her mother was Kristín, daughter of Bishop Guðbrandur Þorláksson) was entitled *Dyggðaspegill* [A mirror of virtues]. In it the poet writes: "dyggðaspegil dýran ungra meyja / dirfist eg þá ungu jómrú segja" [a precious mirror of virtue for young maidens / I make bold to call this young virgin] (NKS 56 d 8vo, p. 94r).¹¹

Among seventeenth-century civil servants loyalty to the king was universal, and in Iceland as elsewhere panegyrics were addressed to reigning monarchs. These pieces survive in manuscript but have received little scholarly attention. In one of them, Einar Sigurðsson of Eydalir's *Konungaprís* [In praise of kings] (extant in JS 538 4to), the poet clearly has high hopes for the future of the young Christian IV (see Jón Árni Friðjónsson 1990, 161–162). In the 1589 *Sálmabók* [Hymnbook] religious pieces such as the "symbolum" [creed] of King Christian III, and also *Konung Friðriks symbolum* can be found, along with *Vísa drottningarinnar af Hungaríu* [A stanza for the Queen of Hungary]. The king's health would always be drunk at any wedding feast. This was originally to commemorate King Ólafur Haraldsson (Saint Óláfr), but later the wording was changed so that the toast could apply to any reigning Danish monarch. Finally, in AM 67 8vo and AM 438 12mo we find pieces praising respectively Frederik III and Christian V (Jón Helgason 1967, 9–10).

11. The poet was probably séra Ólafur Jónsson of Staður in Ségandafjörður; see Þórunn Sigurðardóttir 1996, 241.

The various religious works and spiritual poems were intended for every member of the society, though poets naturally paid due heed to more specific prospective audiences. For example, some hymns were intended for children and the uneducated, while other works were directed towards pastors or servants, “að það þjóni með dyggð og hollustu” [so that they may serve in virtue and loyalty] (*Sálmabók* 1589, ccv).

Though official book production in Iceland as elsewhere at this time was largely in the hands of the learned classes, there were exceptions, such as the important *rímur* poet Guðmundur Bergþórsson (1657–1705), who, though uneducated, were well able to compose verse. Guðmundur occupied a special position because a disability prevented him from walking to work like other men. There are also instances of women composing poetry but these are very much the exception. In Iceland there was a native-born elite that regarded itself as a kind of indigenous aristocracy. It were supportive of royal authority, believing such power to derive from God. This class took note of post-Reformation fashion abroad, as when it composed or commissioned occasional poetry for its members and families to mark special events or circumstances. These poems are clearly produced within particular families, which then made sure that the works were collected and preserved in a manuscript volume. One example is the poetry composed in connection with Jón Arason, the provost of Vatnsfjörður and his family (see Þórunn Sigurðardóttir 2003). Educated men also composed religious pieces, a task that they regarded as particularly important; such verse enjoyed greater prestige than other kinds. These same poets also produced poems of instruction, wisdom, and moral improvement. Yet the same writers were no less active when it came to popular genres such as *rímur* or secular prose literature; it was pastors who composed the most popular comic poems. Scholars in Iceland received their initial formal education in the Latin schools that had been founded on Danish models, and many of them later studied at the University of Copenhagen. The Icelandic society that awaited their return was certainly less diverse and colorful than that of the Danish capital. Nevertheless, there were common people in need of edifying texts, while the upper orders of society were well able to appreciate works of celebration, praise, and the like. Both groups needed religious

poetry associated with the liturgical calendar and with various everyday events, but also with key moments on life's journey. But what were the links between the kind of education that these learned poets had experienced and the texts that they produced? Where did their ideas about poetic structure, style, and language come from? To what extent were such influences Icelandic or from farther afield? The next chapter seeks to address these questions.

